



April 26, 2024

United States House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
The Honorable Harriet Hageman, Chair
The Honorable Teresa Leger Fernandez, Ranking Member
1324 Longworth Building Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Support of H.R. 2687, A Bill to Assist Alaska Native Elders, and Alaska Native people who are Blind or Disabled

Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Bering Straits Native Corporation ("BSNC"), the corporation organized under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act ("ANCSA"), for the Bering Straits region, which encompasses the majority of Alaska's Seward Peninsula and the coastal lands of eastern Norton Sound, I am writing to express support for the enactment of H.R. 2687 into law to protect Alaska Native Elders, as well as blind or disabled Alaska Native people.

As an Alaska Native Corporation ("ANC"), we serve more than 8,200 shareholders of which over 1,700 are Elders aged 65 or older. Many of our shareholders continue to live a subsistence lifestyle in rural and remote villages in our region, where they endure harsh living conditions. Villages have limited access to the road system, while many are only seasonally accessible by boat or air which increases the costs for goods, services, and medical care. That is why many agencies, including the U.S. Congress, U.S. Census Bureau, Indian Health Services and State of Alaska recognize these Alaska Native residents as a vulnerable and disadvantaged population.

BSNC has always supported shareholders and descendants through providing benefits and opportunities that include dividend distributions, educational scholarships, cultural programs, internships and benefits to Elders and Alaska Native people who are blind or disabled. However, many Elders and blind or disabled Alaska Native people also rely on federal assistance programs for housing, nutritional assistance, Medicare, and Medicaid. Since 1976, Section 29 of ANCSA (43 U.S.C. §1626) has excluded the first \$2,000 in ANC dividends when making determinations of eligibility for governmental assistance programs. This \$2,000 amount has remained unchanged for several decades.

Congress first authorized ANCs to establish Settlement Trusts in 1988 to enable ANCs to better provide benefits to their shareholders. Settlement Trusts are one of the most powerful tools ANCs possess to help Alaska Native people combat poverty and the many ills that accompany it. However, Congress has never amended ANCSA to create an exclusion for benefits received by Alaska Native people from the Settlement Trusts. The result has generally been that Settlement Trust distributions have been included by governmental agencies in determining whether a recipient has too much income to be eligible to receive benefits under governmental assistance programs. In many cases, the Settlement Trust distributions are in an amount (either alone or in conjunction with other income) that causes loss of eligibility for the government programs. So, the governmental benefits will end.



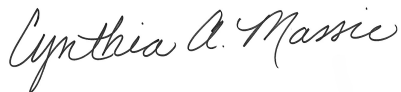
H.R. 2687 provides a much-needed improvement in the treatment of distributions from the Trusts to the most vulnerable of Our People, our Elders and blind and disabled. As you know, under H.R. 2687, distributions of Trust benefits to Alaska Native Elders (age 65 years or older) and blind or disabled Alaska Native people will not count against those individuals for purposes of determining eligibility for governmental assistance programs. The legislation is critical because it prevents Elders and blind and disabled Alaska Native people from losing eligibility for important, life-sustaining governmental benefits such as housing assistance and food stamps, by virtue of a distribution of benefits to them from their Alaska Native Settlement Trusts.

Our Elders, blind, and disabled should not have to choose between healthcare and receiving a Trust distribution that will allow them to pay their bills each month.

H.R. 2687 is very targeted to Alaska Native Elders and blind and disabled Alaska Native people and does not provide a broad comprehensive exclusion of income for eligibility determination purposes across the total population of Alaska Native people. While BSNC believes such an exclusion should ultimately be enacted, because ANCSA benefits should not cause the loss of other benefits to which Alaska Native people are otherwise entitled because they are U.S. citizens, BSNC also believes it very important to prioritize the needs of our Elders and blind and disabled population.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee and the Congress to move this bill to enactment as soon as possible. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information or materials for the Committee as it considers this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,



Cindy Massie
President

